

# HOW ARE MUNICIPALITIES PROCEEDING WITH PLANNING MATTERS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

OPPI Member Survey Findings

## Context

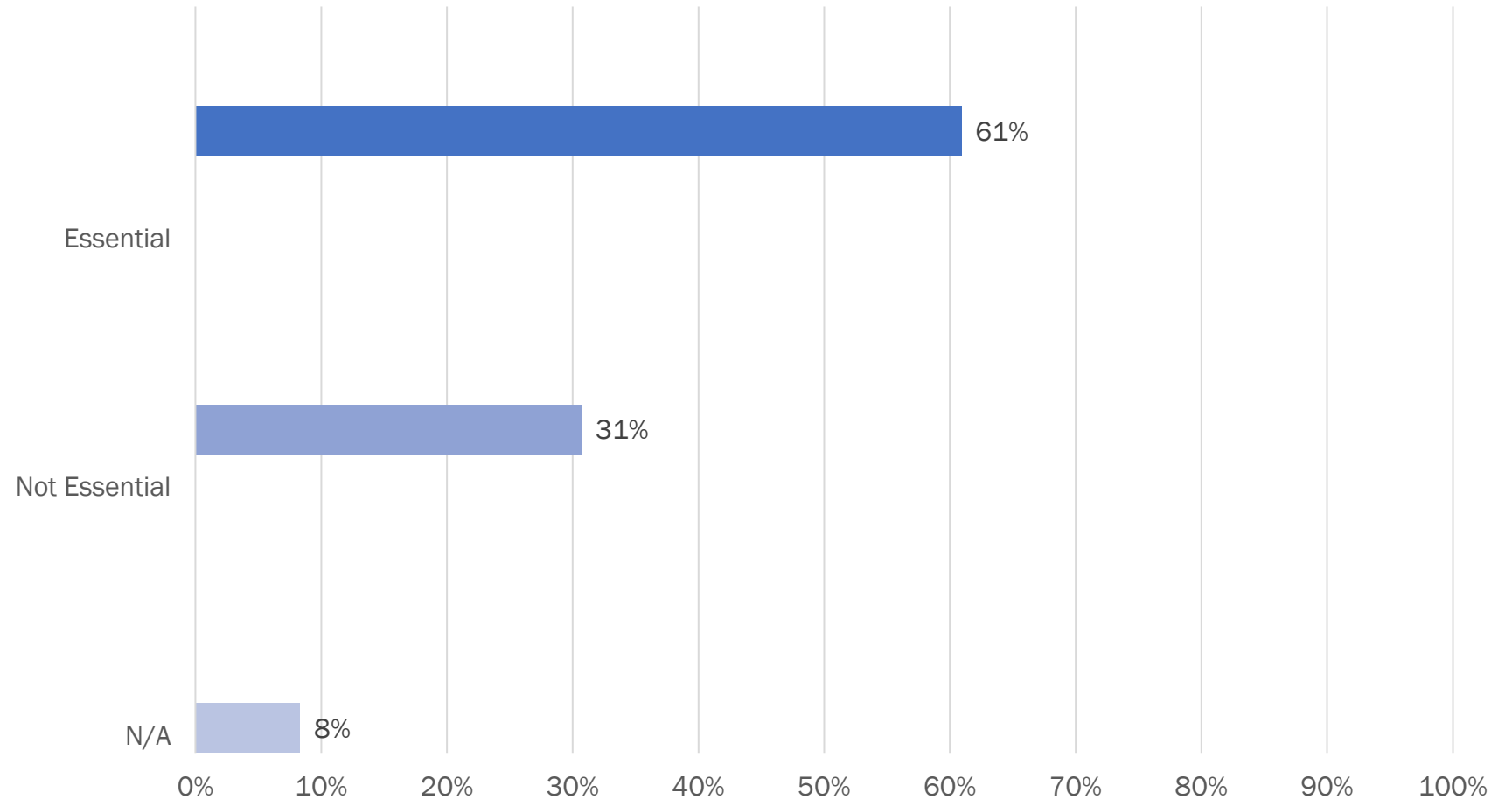
- Like most professions, Ontario planners have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis – our familiar business practices are no longer functioning, and we have been forced to adapt.
- To better understand these “on-the-ground” realities, OPPI conducted a member survey geared towards uncovering how municipalities are processing planning applications during the current state of emergency.
- The survey went out to our over 4000 members and received 300 responses from April 22<sup>nd</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- This document provides an overview of the key findings from the survey.



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# THE SITUATION IN ONTARIO'S MUNICIPALITIES

# Over 60% of respondents work for municipalities that have declared the function of planning departments as an “essential service”



# Main reasons why respondents' planning departments have been declared an “essential service”

- Avoid creating significant backlog in planning applications / approvals
- Maintain a critical source of revenue for municipalities
- Stay consistent with legislative timelines for processing applications and other matters
- Support the development industry as it will be a key economic driver during the post-COVID recovery
- Maintain ability to process high priority / essential applications including ones tied to public safety
- Day-to-day functions can be maintained with staff working remotely

# Special procedures to manage applications during the COVID-19 crisis

## Receiving applications

- Accepting electronic submissions (via website, email, etc.)
- Contactless physical drop-off locations, or via appointment
- Accepting applications without commissioning

## Receiving payments

- Accepting electronic / online payments
- Allowing delayed payments

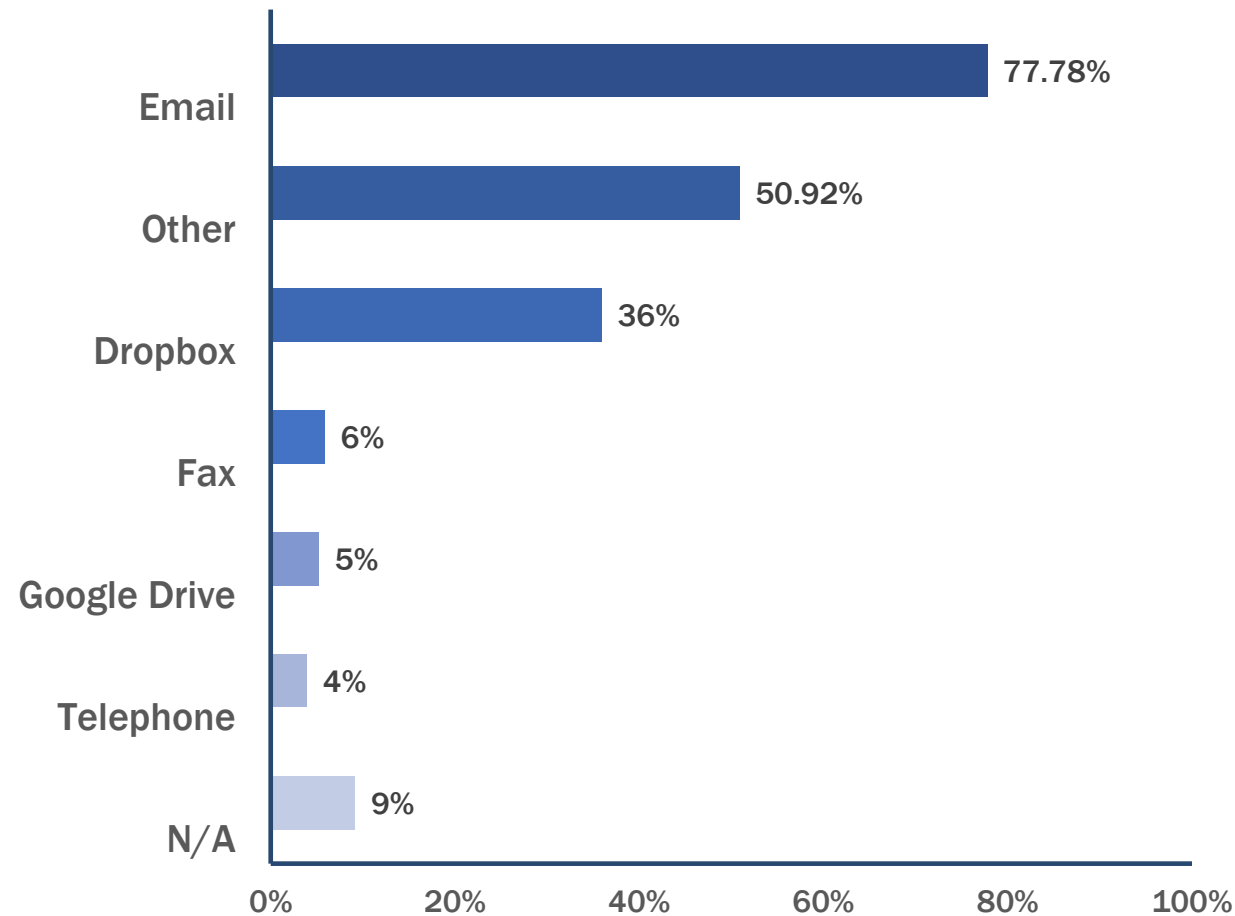
## Reviewing applications

- Virtual meetings with proponents and some virtual public meetings for input
- Notices provided online / newspapers, as opposed to just posting on-site
- Electronic circulation, review, comments, etc.
- Staff provided technology to work remotely (VPNs, hardware, etc.)

## Final approvals

- Provided via emails, not physically signed
- At virtual council meetings

# Reported approaches to collecting planning applications

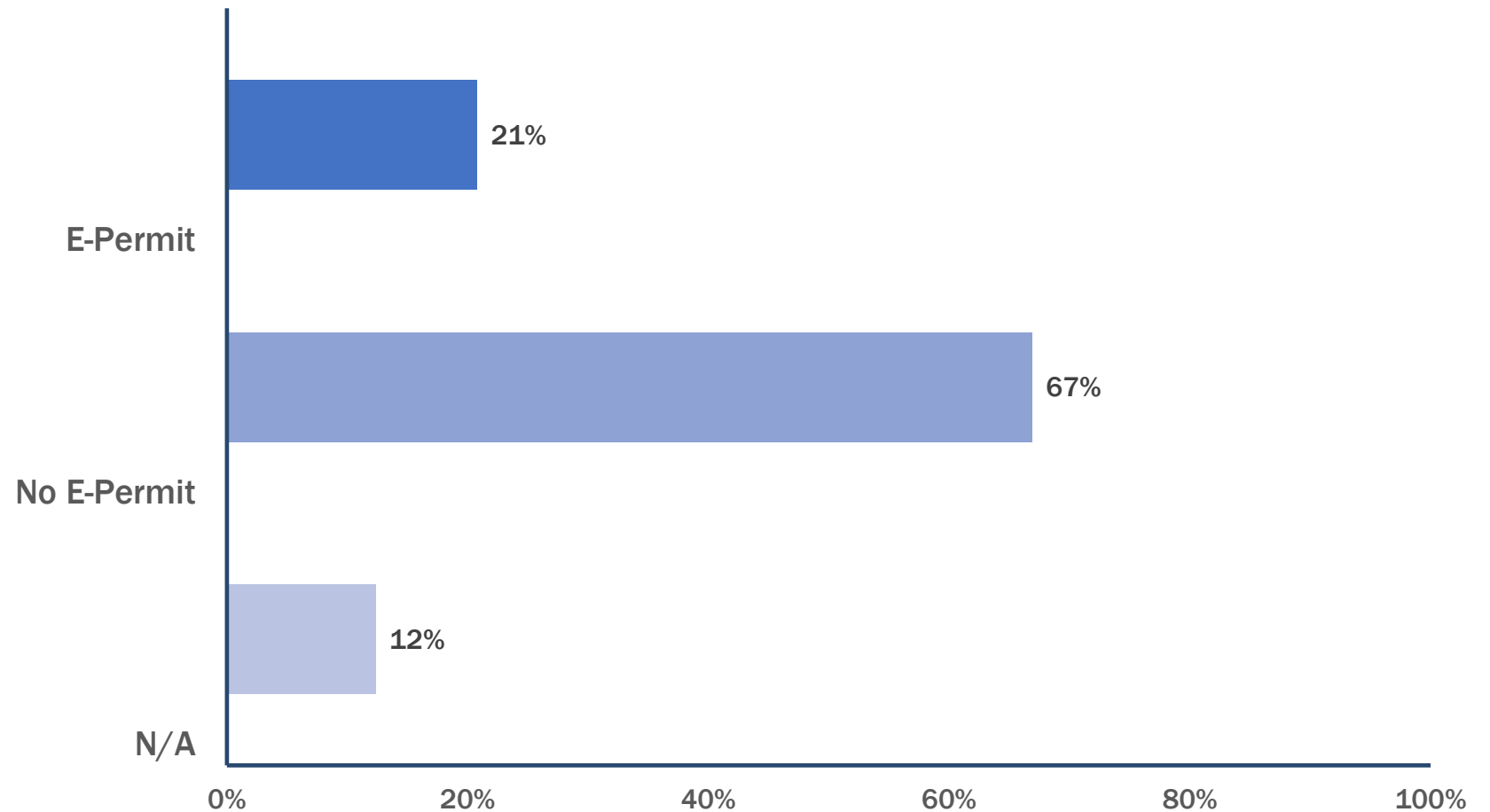


## Components of “Other”:

- Specialized software
- FTP site / online portals
- Flash drives
- Couriers / regular mail
- Drop-off with staff  
*(some still accepted in-person collections)*

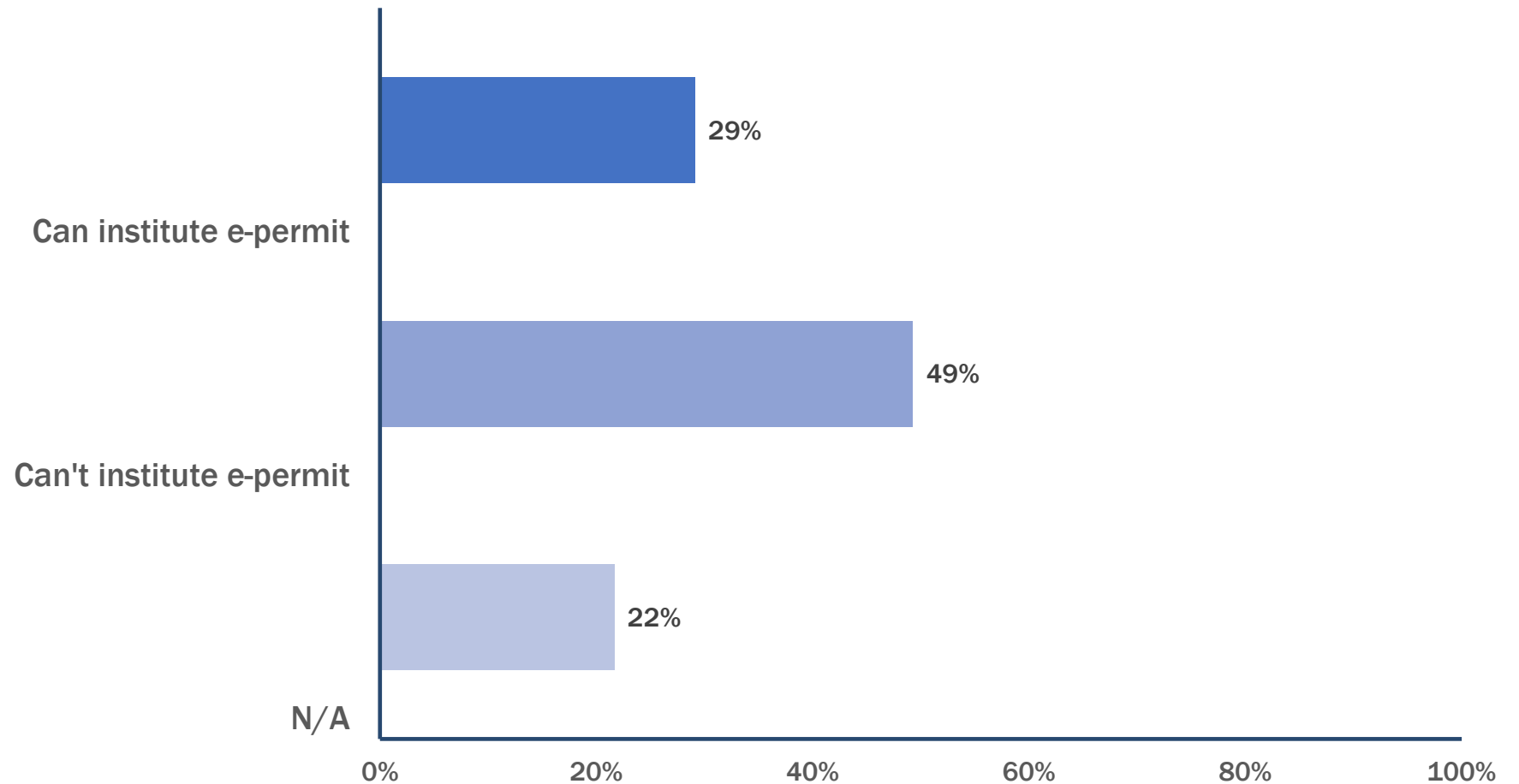
Note: Percentages do not add up as many municipalities are accepting applications via multiple methods

# Overwhelming majority of respondents do not have an “e-permit” system to accept applications





# Half of respondents are unable to institute an “e-permit” system during this crisis



# Main barriers identified in instituting an “e-permit” system

Hardware  
issues

Implementation  
time

Setup  
cost

Corporate  
culture

Training

Unstable  
internet

Migration of  
legacy files

Security  
concerns

Complexity  
receiving  
payments

Incapability with  
commenting  
partners

Logistics  
around  
circulation

# Municipal decisions on development applications during the current crisis

- Among respondents, there was a split on whether their municipalities are currently making decisions on development matters
- Among the ones that are making decisions:
  - Various approaches to prioritizing which applications proceed to Council for approval vs which ones are deferred (considerations include level of urgency, level of controversy, need for public meeting, etc.)
  - Ones with delegated approval authority to staff are continuing to proceed with approvals of most applications in this category
  - Virtual meetings are being used to discuss settlements with proponents
- Many are still waiting to set up technology for virtual meetings before approvals can go to Councils or other approval bodies

# Procedures currently helping planning process continue in many municipalities

Accepting digital submissions

Conducting virtual meetings

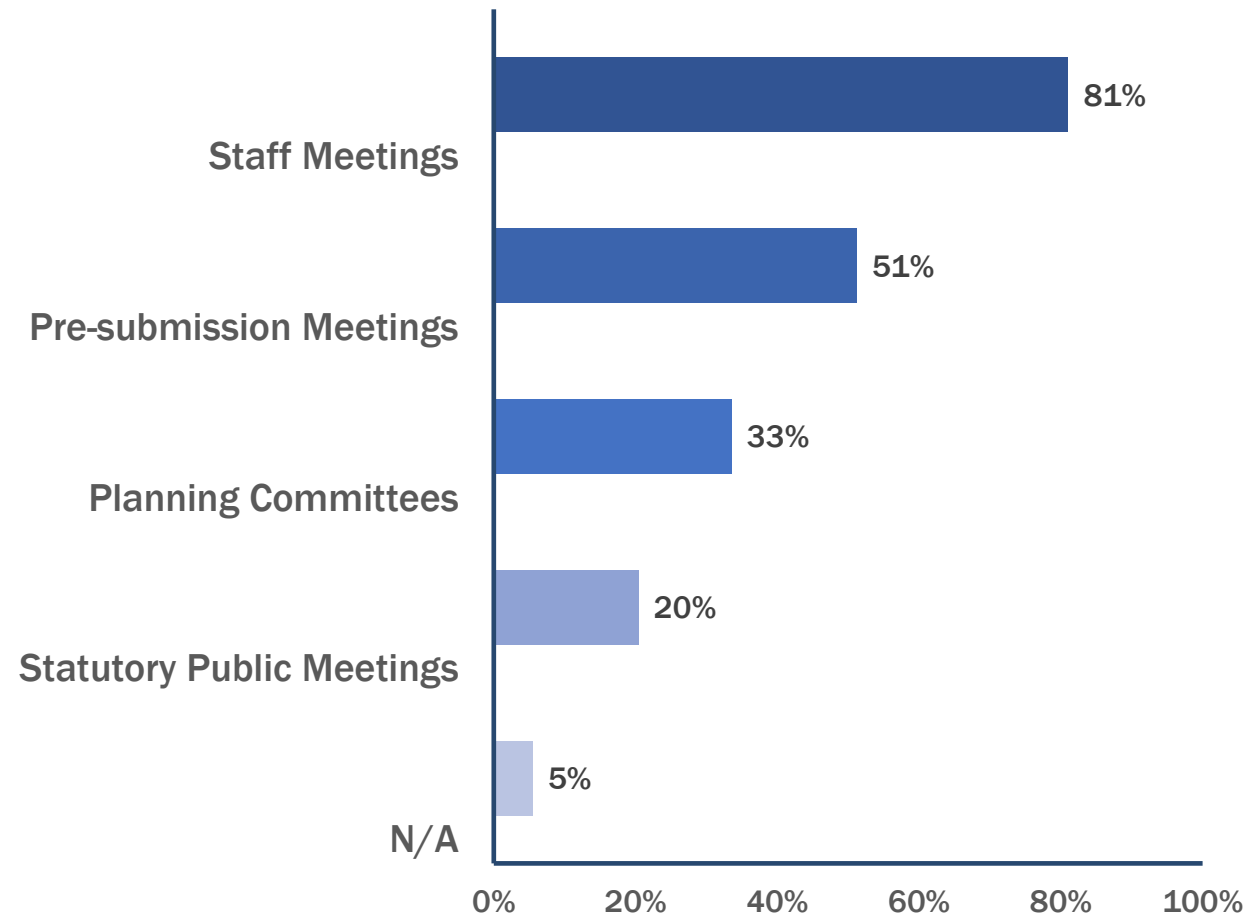
Allowing remote work for staff

Setting up e-permitting

Accepting online / electronic payments

Conducting virtual /mail / phone consultations

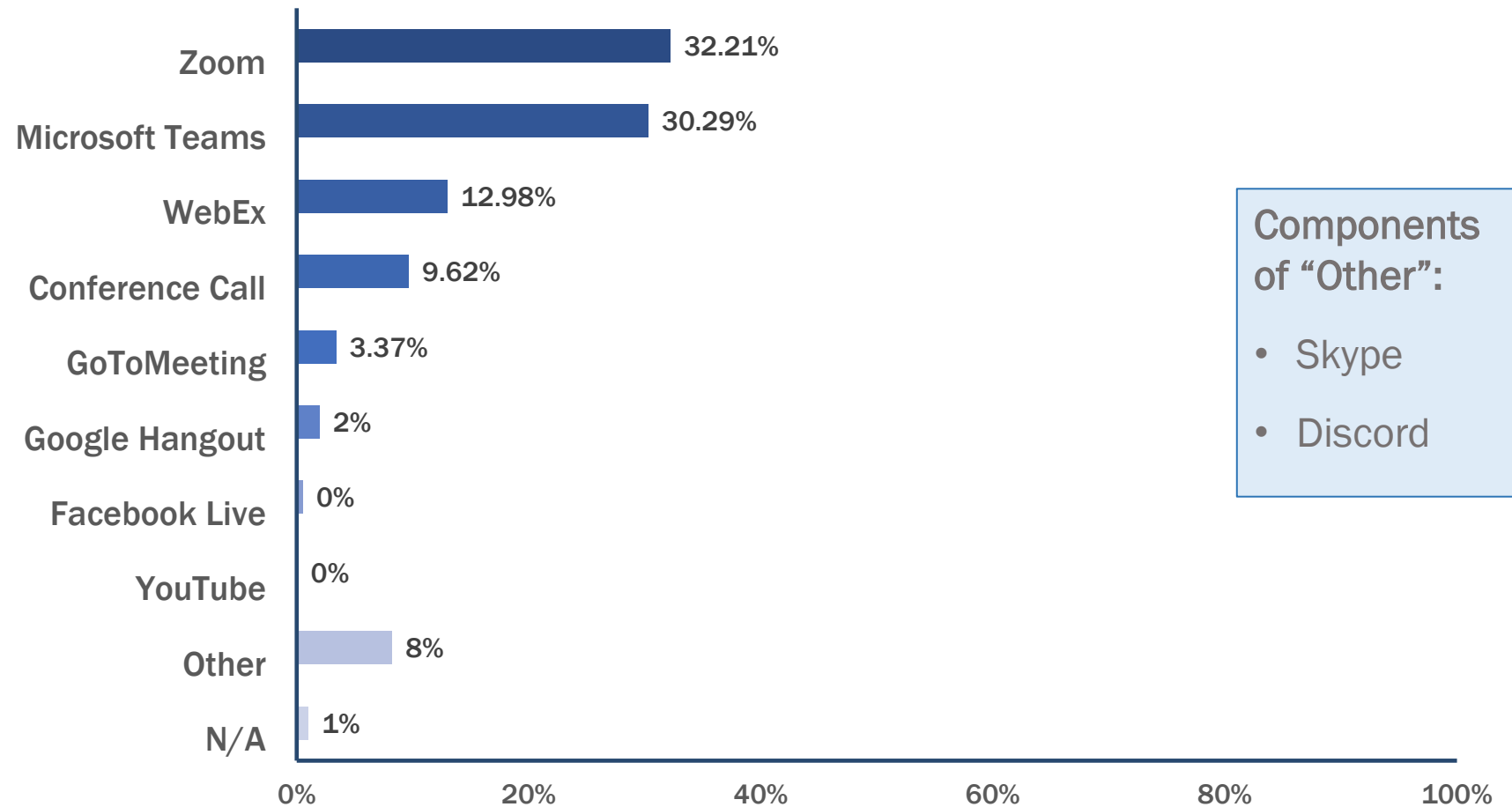
# Level of uptake for online sessions



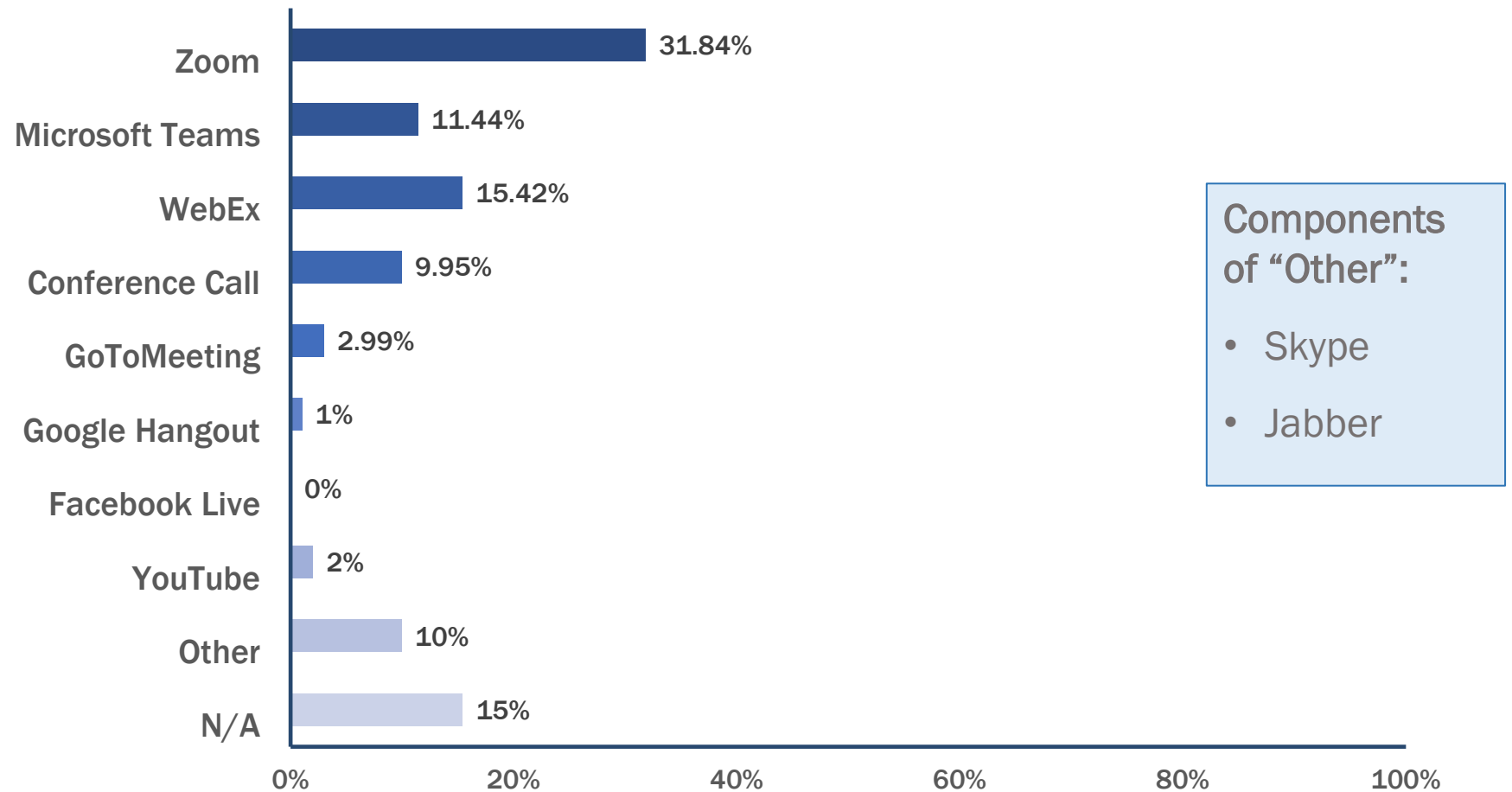
## Other meetings conducted online:

- Council
- Committee of Adjustment
- Advisory Committee
- Urban Design Review Panel
- Meetings with Proponents
- Meetings with other agencies / municipalities

# Primary technology solution for internal meetings



# Primary technology solution for external meetings



# Approaches for public input during virtual meetings

Many municipalities are not yet setup to receive public comment / questions during virtual meetings. Respondents working at municipalities who are, are using the following approaches:

Livestream on YouTube  
with questions pre-  
submitted

Email comments /  
questions to clerk during  
meeting

Call-in comments /  
questions during  
meeting (clerk  
manages)

Chat function on various  
online presentation  
platforms

Online engagement  
platforms like  
CheckMarket

Feedback via  
SurveyMonkey after  
presentation

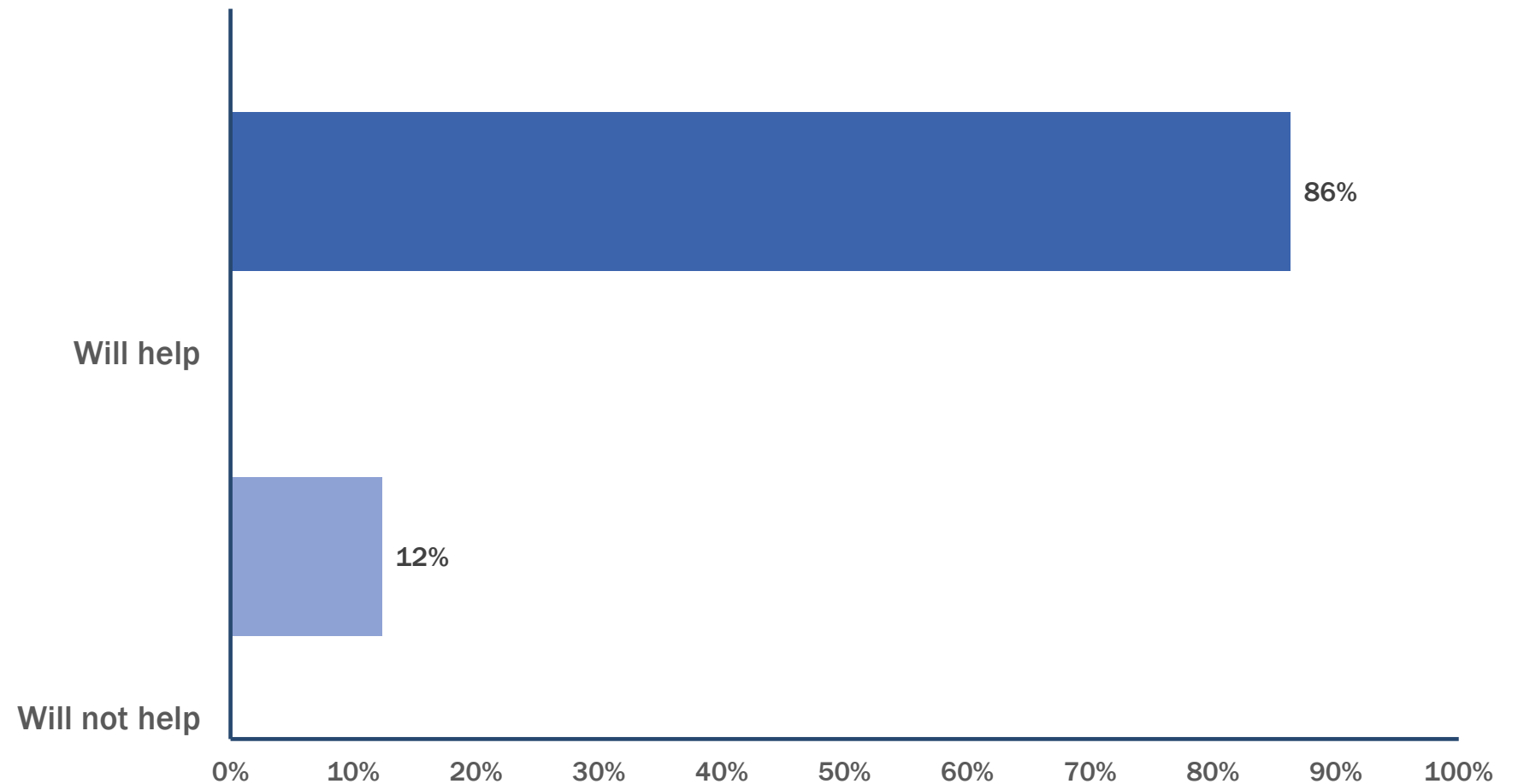
Virtual public  
delegations with upfront  
notice

Written  
submissions/comments  
by mail or email

Teleconference  
presentation



# Overwhelming majority think more provincial guidelines on virtual public engagement will help



# Barriers to conducting planning work

## Technology Issues

- Lack of IT infrastructure / faulty solutions
- Cost to implement technology solutions
- Lack of proper hardware at home for users (i.e. large monitors to review drawings)
- Level of training required for users on new platforms
- Incompatibility of technology across commenting partners
- Risk aversion to adopting technology among staff
- Constituents lacking tools / knowhow to participate in virtual forums
- Accessibility to quality broadband

## Legislative / Regulatory Issues

- Lack of guidance from Province
- Differing viewpoints on interpretation of legislative/regulatory provisions

## Other

- Key meetings not occurring (i.e. planning and development committee, public-facing meetings)
- Inability to get commissioned signatures
- Challenges with assessments that require field tests / site visits
- Operating procedures requiring staff to go into the office (i.e. circulation list, labels, mailouts)
- Virtual meetings not inclusive form of consultation (i.e. seniors)
- Lack of remote access to physical files in the office
- Inability to proceed to LPAT
- Provincial flexibility allowing municipalities to delay progress on applications
- Childcare and other family issues while working from home

# Policy, regulatory or legislative changes / clarifications required by planners

Detailed regulations on minimum standards specifically for virtual public engagement

Interpretive bulletin on O.Reg 149/20

Extension of MCR deadline

Explicit permissibility of digital signatures / execution of agreements

Exemption of 90-day period to process heritage permits

Surveyor, environmental or geotechnical investigators designation as essential service

Conversation Authority requirements during emergency

Exemption of time period for minor variance conditions issued prior to emergency

Privacy issues

# Most respondents anticipate large-scale changes as a result of the COVID-19 crisis

- Faster adoption of technology in planning work leading to more efficient interdepartmental coordination, increase in remote working, shift to entirely digital process – resulting in faster application processing times
- More flexible public engagement requirements with increasing focus on digital tools
- Reduced requirements for office space due to increased public comfort with remote work
- Reduced demand on transportation / transit due to increased comfort with remote work
- Reduced requirements for brick and mortar retail due to increased adoption of delivery (will impact parking, loading, waste management planning)
- Other: wider sidewalks, more public realm, increase in public appetite for low density housing and away from high density
- Short-term pressure on planners to “relax” opinions to allow more projects for post-Covid recovery

# Role of OPPI in helping members moving forward

## Sharing Best Practices

- Key topics include leveraging new technology, digital communication tools, business continuity practices, etc.
- Share public articles, publish blogs, develop case studies, etc.
- Develop guidelines informed by municipalities in Ontario and other provinces, could be built from more member surveys

## Providing Formal Training and Education

- Develop code of conduct and ethics training with focus on digital communication
- Approaches for virtual public engagement as part of CPL
- Leniency on CPL requirements for 2020
- More self-learning and online training options

## Engaging with MMAH

- Advocate for modernized public engagement provisions with virtual tools being part of the norm
- Seek more details / guidance from province on legislative changes
- Continue with share policy / legislative updates obtained from MMAH with members
- Advocate on other measures to expediate planning process
- Provide profession's recommendations for post-COVID recovery

## Other

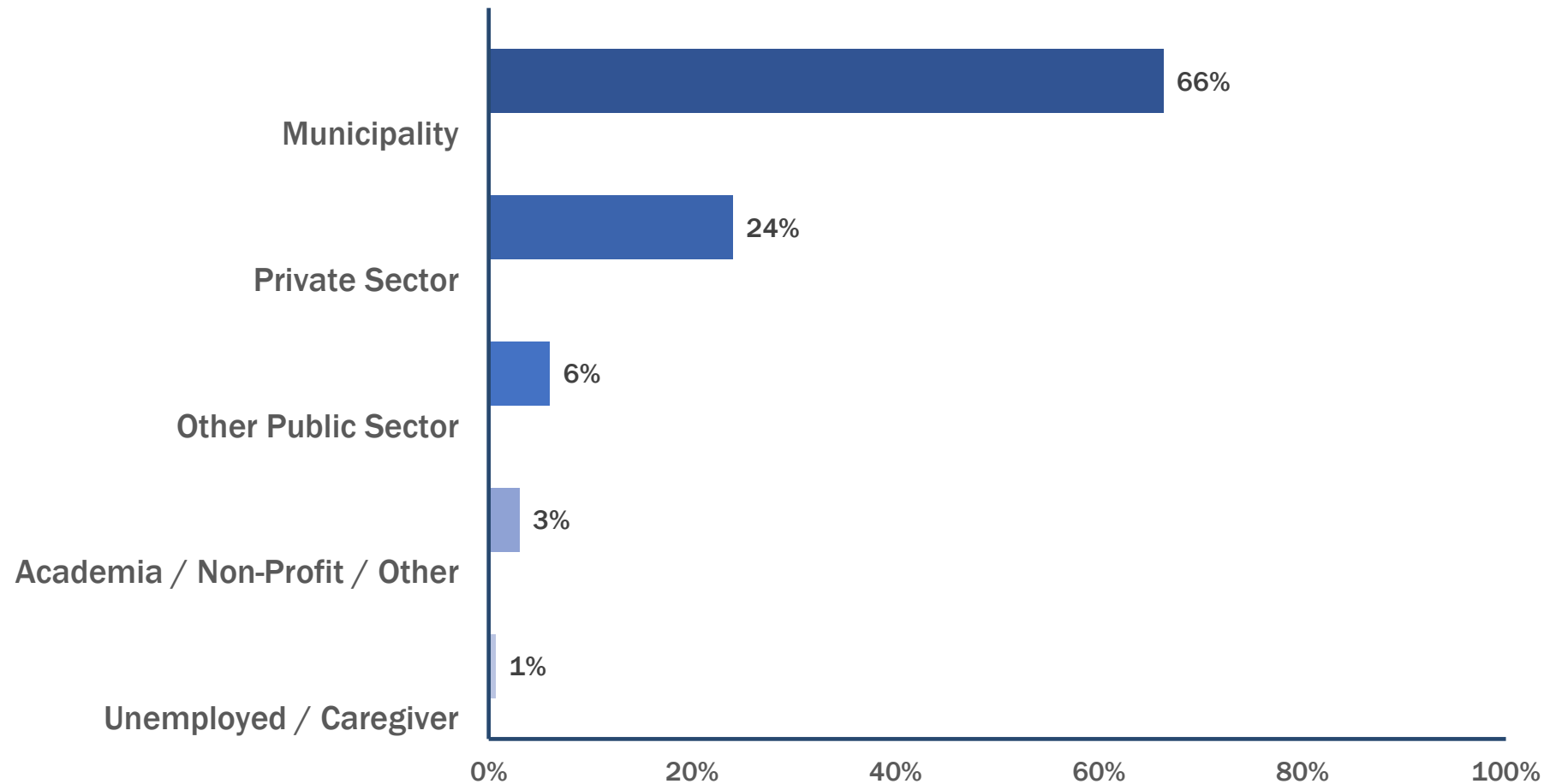
- Employment support / job postings
- Encourage adoption of new technologies in profession
- Provide consistent legal interpretation on legislative provisions for profession
- Reduce membership fees, especially during this crisis



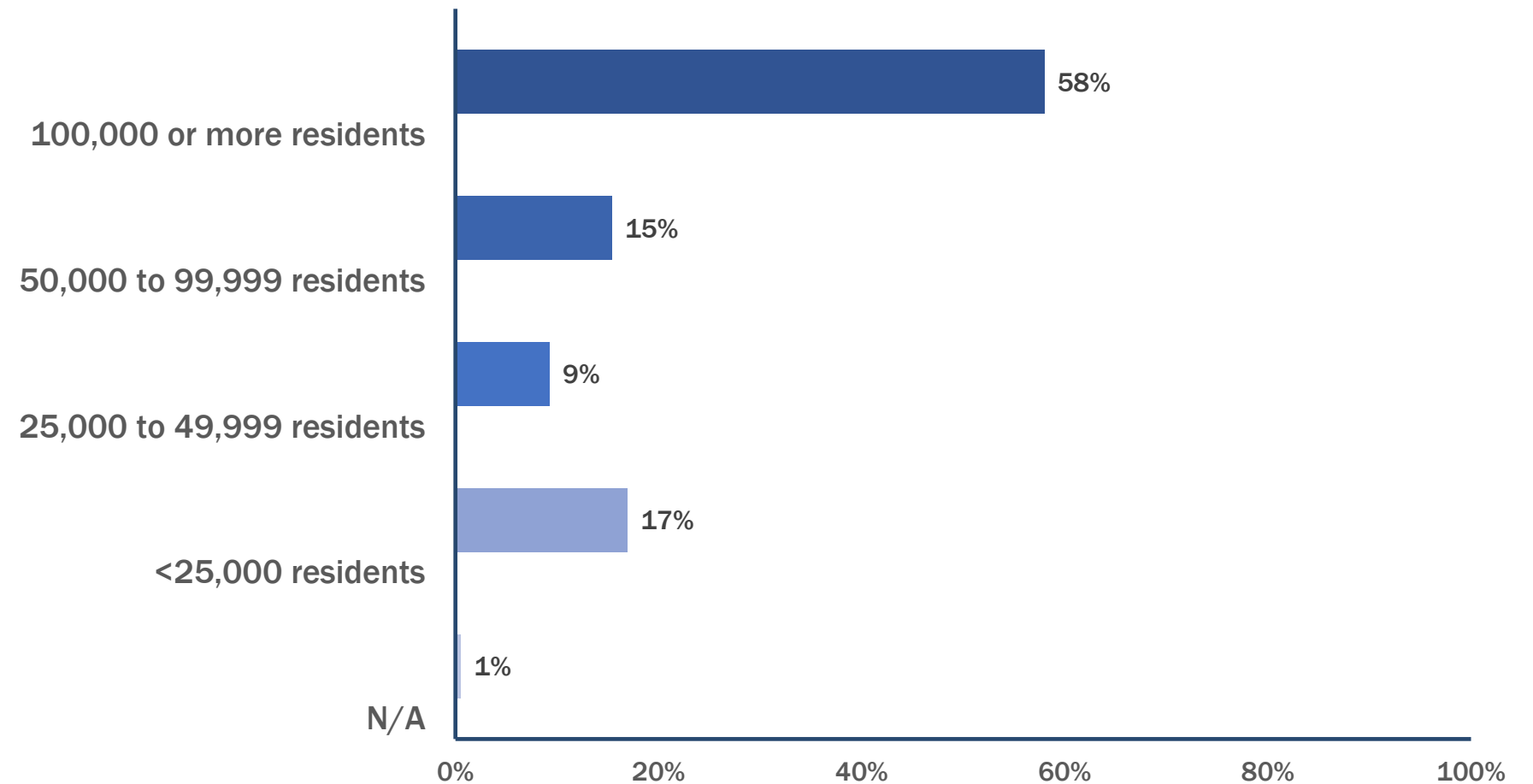
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# RESPONDENT PROFILE

# Two-thirds of respondents employed by municipalities, approximately a quarter are in the private sector

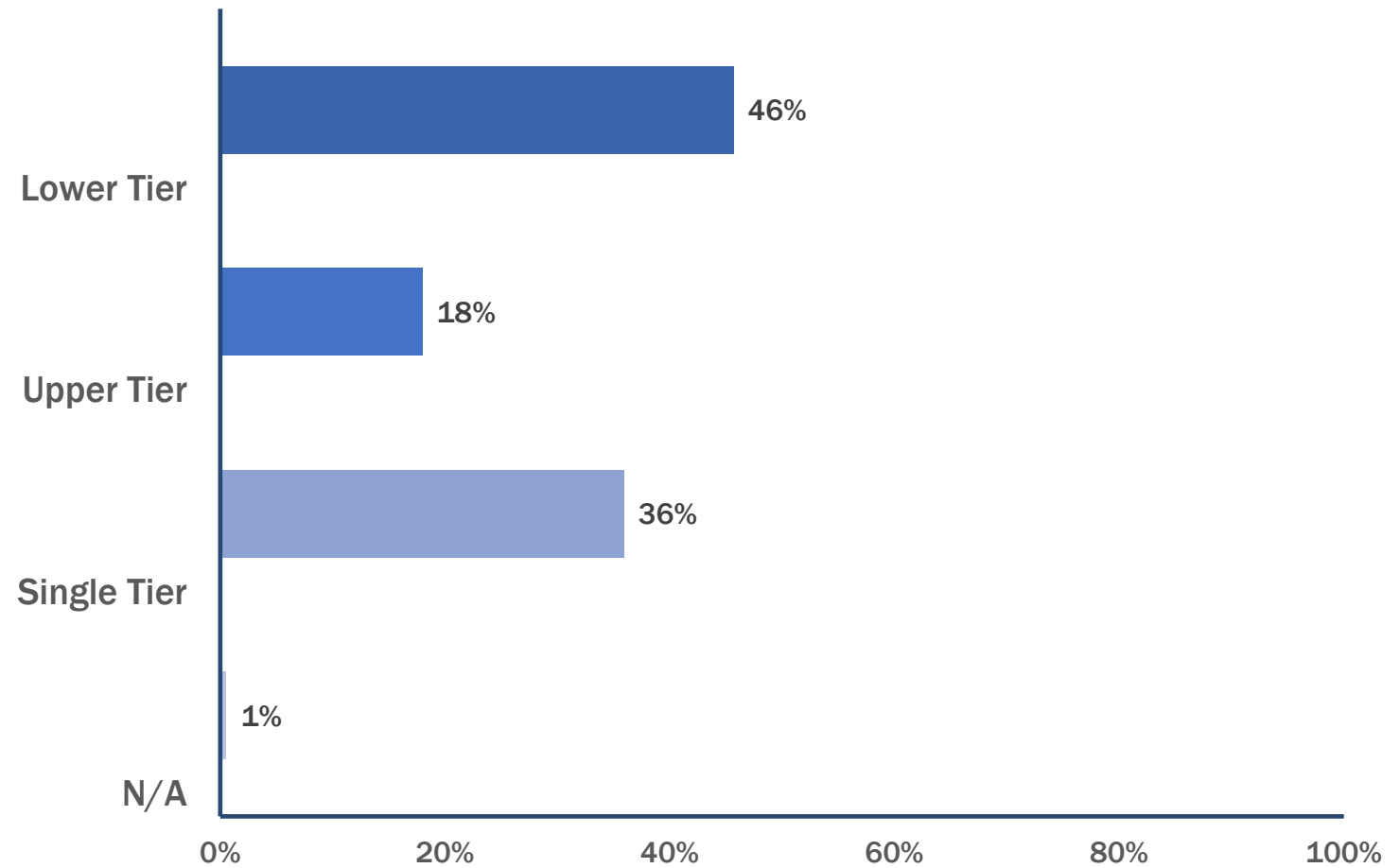


# Majority of respondents primarily work in large municipalities





# Approximately half work in lower-tier municipalities





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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:  
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